A Fascinating Detective Story

By Horace Hutchinson

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he exclaimed in a voice of pain that rent my heart. "It will be all to go through again! All, and worse!"

I had guessed before what all this suppression and strain must be costing uncle, but those were the first words in which he had ever voiced them to me. I could do nothing to help him. I found no phrases of comfort. All I did was to put out my hand and stroke his poor head as it lay there so miserably.

I really believe that he did find a species of solace in that dumb animal caress, for presently he lifted his face again and looked at me. Then he took my hand in his and stroked it. "Bless you, dear," he said. "I did not mean to be a coward. I must go through with it—we must—you and I together. Don't believe, dear, that I do not realize all you are doing for me, all you are suffering for me."

Then he went away, awkwardly and man-like. His voice had begun to be choky. I was fearfully sorry for him. And I am sure he did not know how those few poor choky words had helped and heartened me. It was one thing to go on bearing the gloom and grief of it all by oneself; it was another, and a lighter thing, to bear it with the knowledge that there was one beside you knowing what you were enduring and grateful to you for your share in it as well as bearing his own far heavier burden.

Therewith there began a new and rather a less grievous phase in our lives, because we were better able to express to each other our sympathy even if it were only in such unspoken ways as a pressure of the hand or a look of mutual understanding. And now and again uncle could even bring himself to speak of what he was enduring and had still to go through.

He did not hide from himself that this trial of Captain Vibart must of necessity lead to a far wider publicity of a great deal of that trouble in his domestic life which had already been in some part disclosed at the inquest. All this we might have hoped to avoid had suspicion not been turned on Captain Vibart by the pure accident of the Manson girl seeing him in the shrubbery path.

Of course, I knew that I ought to be thankful that justice was in process of being done and my young aunt's cruel murder avenged, but I believe I should have been more truly grateful if all recollection of it could have been allowed to fade from the mind of the important public, even at the cost of letting the murderer go at large.

Again, after Sergeant Crisp's announcement to me of the arrest, there followed what appeared a wholly inexplicable and unnecessarily long interval in which nothing, as it seemed, was done. Presumably something was being done all the while, letters passing, forms being signed, innumerable knots in red tape tied and untied. At length we were told that the arrested man had been delivered up by the French police authorities and had been brought to England, and again a long lapse of all apparent activity ensued, during which, as Sergeant Crisp, whom I saw twice again, put it, "the case was being prepared."

Considering the few witnesses that could be needed and the obvious character of the whole evidence it was a preparation which seemed to the lay mind of inordinate length, but the lay mind always has been, and I suppose always will be, incapable of understanding the long-drawn-out agonies of the law. In the meantime Captain Vibart had been charged before the magistrates and duly committed, and the case, we were told, was finally down for trial at the forthcoming Summer assizes.

Uncle Ralph had withdrawn himself from all public life since the death of Aunt Enid, but, of course, everybody in the neighborhood knew him and was most truly sorry for him. There was not, I suppose, in the whole county a man more popular. I am sure that all the officials connected with the court in our little country town, where the trial was held, did their very best to mitigate its horror and to make things as little uncomfortable for us as possible, but, for all that, it was very dreadful. The sordidness and unattractiveness of all the surroundings of a court house, its dreary dirty and ill-lighted passages, its hard, comfortless seats, all are small items adding to the misery of the whole. There seems to be a mechanical inhumanity about it all which is very dreadful.

In large part the evidence brought forward at the trial was only a recapitulation of that which had been given at the inquest. There was the keeper's evidence of the finding of the body, the summoning of uncle, the pursuit of Heasden through the bushes, and the rest of it with which we were very familiar. It was when Celeste was brought into the box that I knew the test was at hand. I looked at uncle. His broad and once so good-humored face was set very firmly. He, too, was bracing himself for what was coming.

I had not seen Celeste for several months. When she left us I had said that I would give her a character if she was looking for another place. I had no option, much as I disliked her, for there was nothing tangible against her. But I had not heard from her and did not know at all what she had been doing in the meantime.

She had not been long in the box before it became very evident what one of the things was that she had been doing. She had talked. But the counsel had been well coached by his solicitor—I believe that is the process—in the questions that he should ask in order to bring out in their strongest and less favorable light the various meetings in London and elsewhere of Aunt Enid and her lover.

It was not until she began to speak of these that the prisoner turned in the dock so as to give me a full view of his face. Hitherto he had faced away from me. I heard him reply "Not Guilty" to the usual challenge, but I had practically not seen him.

His mustaches, which were his most obvious peculiarity, had been closely shaved, as I was told, and his whole appearance greatly altered when he was arrested, but he had let them grow again in prison, and I could not see that he looked at all different from the man whom I had so cordially disliked at Scotney, except that his face, which was then bronzed from the Indian sun and life in the open air, was now very pale—the result, I imagine, of being within doors. He was plainly very nervous and scarcely ceased to clasp and unclasp his hands on the front of the dock, but that, after all, was not unnatural.

Celeste's account of his meetings with my young aunt appeared to interest him more than any of the evidence which had preceded it. Perhaps he was wondering how much she knew, or perhaps—this idea also flashed across me as I watched him—he was wondering at her power of invention. How much of what she said might be true I had no means of knowing, but if only a half of it were veracious the meetings must have been far more frequent than I, at least, ever had suspected.

Counsel on both sides really did seem to understand that this exposure to the vulgar view of his domestic troubles must be a very ghastly indignity and grief for Uncle Ralph to suffer, for when he was called as witness neither in examination nor cross-examination was he harassed further than was necessary to elicit the essential facts. He had, of course, to make public a great deal more than he had revealed at the inquest.

Celeste's evidence had already borne frank witness to certain disagreements between husband and wife on account of Captain Vibart, and uncle candidly told the jury that he had in the first instance ordered Captain Vibart out of the house on the Thursday evening, but had agreed subsequently that he should remain until the following morning in order not to give the servants occasion to suspect a scandal. I was terribly sorry for uncle when the counsel for the crown began to ask him about his interview with Aunt Enid on the subject, but it was a brief torture, for uncle said at once that he had extracted a promise from her that she would never see or communicate in any way with the captain again.

In spite of which promise she had, on the very next morning, if Celeste's evidence were to be believed, received, by Celeste's own hand, a note from the captain.

When the prisoner was first arrested in Paris he had protested his utter innocence of the crime and had denied that he had ever left London on the night when it was committed. Evidence was put in to show that this was the line that he had taken on his arrest. But almost as soon as ever he came into the box and began to answer the questions which his counsel put to him it was plain that he had abandoned this line altogether. Presumably he had been better advised in the interval, seeing how strong the facts were against him.

It was for this reason, because he was prepared to make full admission of the fact that he had visited Scotney that evening, that Matilda Manson was not more severely cross-questioned than she had been. Nor was all the evidence in regard to the motor car in which his visit had been made at all disputed. He even admitted, on being questioned, that the note handed by Celeste to her mistress was in his writing, and that its purport was to propose a meeting in the Summer-house at nine o'clock on that very Friday night.

Admitting so much, it was scarcely much use to him to attempt to deny anything that Celeste had said, no matter to what depth her vivid fancy might have embroidered the actual truth of it. He declared that the single motive of his coming down had been to see once again the woman whom he admitted that he loved, and to say farewell to her, as he had not been able to say it before.

That, so far, was his story. He had motored down from London, hiring the car according to the evidence given, turning it, just as the prosecution had supposed, at that point under the Scotney House trees where their shadow is deepest.

"And what time would that be, that you left the car and went through the gate into the shrubbery?"

"Twenty minutes to nine."

"You took note of the time?"

"I looked at my watch just before I turned out the lights of the car."

"Yes—and then?"

"I went along the path to the Summer-house."

"You saw no one?"

"No."

"And what did you do?"

"I sat in the Summer-house and waited."

"With impatience?"

"I was not particularly impatient at first. I suppose when nine o'clock came I began to be impatient."

"You looked at your watch again?"

"Several times."

"By the moonlight?"

"So far as I remember, it was by the light of matches—I smoked a cigarette or two."

"And did you sit still all the time?"

"No; I walked up once or twice to the junction of the path to the Summer-house with the main path and looked down the path."

"How many times did you do that?"

"I daresay three times—I am not quite certain."

"Would that be before nine o'clock or after?"

"The first time, I think, was just about nine, and the others afterward."

"And the last of those was—at what hour?"

"Just before half-past nine."

"And at half-past nine what did you do?"

"I came out from the Summer-house for the last time. I stood a minute or so, perhaps, looking down the path toward the house, and then I turned and went down the path the other way again and got into the car and went back to London."

"And during all that time you saw no one?"

"Not a soul."

"Not a soul all the time since you left the car to the time when you were in it and driving again?"

"That is so."

His counsel intimated that this was the end of the questions that he wished to put to his client, but, of course, all supposed that his real trial was only just about to begin in the cross-questions which the prosecution for the crown was likely to put to him.

The K. C. began by asking him why he had gone down alone in the car, why he had not taken a driver with him? Captain Vibart replied that he really preferred driving himself, and, further, even had that not been so, that he preferred being alone on this particular errand, so as not to compromise Lady Carlton by letting anyone know that he had been to Scotney.

The counsel appeared to accept this as satisfactory, and then turned to ask him about his period of waiting. Had he seen nobody at all? How was it, if he was there all alone and as long as he said, that he did not see Matilda Manson, for one, coming along the main path?

His reply was that part at least, probably a half, of the main shrubbery path, where the Summer-house faced it, was in deep shadow and that it was extremely probable that anyone might pass along, past the little side path's entrance, and not be seen from the Summer-house.

And he had not heard a sound? He remarked that he had heard a dog barking in the distance, once or twice a man or boy whistling, and several times repeated an owl hooting. Except those sounds he had heard none distinctly.

"So then you went back to London, disappointed?"

"Yes—if you like to put it so."

"You did not attempt to go down to the house?"

"Certainly not. What would have been the good?"

The counsel did not reply. After all, he was not there to be the questioned one. But he did say, in a tone that implied much sympathy: "It must have been very cold waiting."

"Rather, not very. It was a lovely night."

"But Autumnal," the counsel commented. "Were you not very cold driving?"

"Not so very."

"Ah, you had a good rug?"

"Yes, a good rug."

"Perhaps two?"

The question was the first that seemed to embarrass him at all. "Yes—I don't know," he said. "Perhaps there may have been two. I was quite warm."

"And these rugs—they were in the car or did you bring them to the garage from your rooms?"

"Neither. I drove the car round to my rooms before I left London and picked up the rugs there."

There was much further criss-cross of question and answer, but no new fact was elicited, and at length he was allowed to quit the witness box and resume his old place in the dock.

To Be Continued Next Sunday.